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SUBJECT: RUSSIA ATTEMPTS TO FRAME KOSOVO DISCUSSION AS A
BREACH OF INTERNATIONAL LAW

REF: MOSCOW 539

Classified By: M/C for Political Affairs Alice G. Wells

¶1. (C) Summary. Russian officials continued to press the "illegality" of Kosovo's independence, EULEX, and the new International Steering Group for Kosovo, even as it observed that a "de facto" partition of Northern Kosovo was occurring as Russia had predicted. The Russian Duma will hold hearings on March 13 on Russia's policy towards post-Soviet frozen conflicts, including on how to respond to South Ossetian and Abkhaz requests for recognition, but the Kremlin remains the decision maker and is content for now to let the consequences of Kosovo's independence play out in the Balkans, and not the Caucasus. Serbian diplomats here intimated strains in the Russian-Serbian relationship, and told us that President Tadic could make a public "gesture of goodwill" towards the EU and U.S. after Serbia's May elections. End Summary.

Partition and Precedent

¶2. (C) The Russian MFA warned in a March 4 press statement that the further "compulsion" of Kosovar Serbs to reconcile with an independent Kosovo could provoke "further deterioration of a situation on the edge." The statement highlighted the Kosovar government's lack of control over its Serb majority, citing continued protests in the north, refusal by Serbs to acknowledge Pristina's authority, and the mass resignation of Serbian police officers from Kosovar forces as reasons for "serious concern." MFA Director for International Organizations Konuzin, who will take up his ambassadorial posting in Belgrade in April, told British diplomats that not only would Kosovo be a new Taiwan, but northern Serb-dominated Kosovo would become Europe's Abkhazia.

Russia Stands Firm Against EULEX and Steering Group

¶3. (SBU) In a March 3 press statement, the MFA reiterated its claim that the International Steering Group (ISG) for Kosovo was illegal and an "arbitrary imposition" that has no grounds in UNSCR 1244 or international law. The statement also complained that the ISG only represented counties that have or will recognize Kosovo's independence, and did not reflect wider international opinion.

State Duma Will Consider Recognition Requests

¶4. (C) The Russian Duma will hold hearings on March 13 regarding "the situation with frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space" and the appeals of South Ossetia and Abkhazia for recognition. Press reports indicate that the South Ossetian parliament asked the international community on March 5 to recognize the independence of the republic, and

Abkhaz "President" Bagapsh was also quoted on March 5 as saying that Abkhazia would formally seek its recognition "this week". The Duma hearings were called by First Deputy Chairman of the CIS Committee Konstantin Zatulin, who stressed that the Duma should consider Russia's options with an open mind. Even analysts close to the security services, such as Director of the International Public Foundation Sergey Kurginyan, downplay the Duma's hearings, insisting that Russia will take steps short of diplomatic recognition to placate the Abkhaz and South Ossetian leaders in order to preserve its "moral highground" on respecting international law.

Serbian Embassy Relays "Gesture of Goodwill"

15. (C) According to DCM Jelica Kurjak, who attended President Tadic's meetings with President-elect Medvedev and is a Tadic protege, the Serbian President was interested in making a public "gesture of goodwill" towards the U.S. and EU after Serbian local -- and possibly parliamentary -- elections in May.

16. (C) Serbian Political Counselor Boris Sekulic added that ties between Belgrade and Moscow were somewhat strained, pointing to the February 28 request from the Serbian Ministry of Justice for Russia to extradite the widow and son of Slobodan Milosevic, who are wanted in Serbia on fraud charges. The Russian Federal Migration Service refused, stating that those who had gained the status of refugees in Russia would not be liable to extradition to the country whence they arrived. Sekulic also noted that Serbia had not received an apology or other acknowledgment from the Russian state-owned television company whose commentator called the assassination of former Serbian PM Djindjic "well-deserved"

(reftel). He said that no high-level visits were currently planned, and that Lavrov's scheduled March 10 visit to Belgrade had been preempted by his February 25 trip with future president Medvedev.

Comment

17. (C) The upcoming Duma debate on South Ossetia and Kosovo will be political theatre, but the decision to recognize lies solely with the Kremlin. The GOR continues to balance provocative statements over a worldwide domino effect caused by Kosovo's recognition with a policy of keeping the frozen conflict leaders on a short leash. While the risk of miscalculation remains, the Kremlin appears content to let the post-UDI consequences play out in the Balkans, and not in their Caucasus backyard.

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